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### Local Theologies on the World Wide Web: Learning Exercises

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# Local Theologies on the World Wide Web: Learning Exercises

Joseph Bosco Bangura and Benno van den Toren

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## Introduction

These learning exercises accompany the article written by Joseph Bosco Bangura and Benno van den Toren, “Local Theologies on the Worldwide Web: Various uses for the study of Theology in Africa” *published by Impact: Journal of Transformation* (forthcoming). The aim is to help upper-level BA and MA students to discover the wide range of materials available for study and research on the internet. This material can be adapted to the specific teaching/learning contexts in which it is applied.

The three sections below provide active learning tasks that help interested researchers, curious learners and students to develop their ability to use the internet to locate both primary and secondary resources for the study of African Theology. For each task, a context is provided to help learners relate the issues raised to wider discussions in the field of African Theology. This is followed by a practical class section and a homework section. The active learning exercises include tasks for learners to carry out online as they search the internet for relevant primary and secondary resource materials. These resources will help broaden students’ understanding of ongoing developments in the study of African Christianity and Theology.

Keywords: internet; research methodology; African theology; primary resources; secondary resources; local theologies; learning exercises; prayer; liberation; christian-muslim-relations; training

## Learning Outcomes

On completion of these active learning exercises, the curious learner, student and interested researcher of African Theology will be able to:

- Discuss the sense in which the growth of the internet across the African continent impacts the theological expressions of African Christians.

- Independently find primary and secondary resources for the study of African Christianity and Theology, and the completion of academic assignments and research projects in this field.

### **Class Preparation**

As part of the prerequisites for taking this class, learners should read the following research article:

- Bangura, J.B., & van den Toren, B. (2021) Local Theologies on the World Wide Web: Various Uses of the Internet for the Study of Theology in Africa. *Impact: Journal of Transformation*, 4(1), 1-8. Retrieved from <https://journals.aiu.ac.ke/index.php/impact/article/view/79>

After reading the article, learners should come to the class session prepared to engage in an animated discussion around the following starter questions:

- What do you believe is the central thesis of this article?
- What questions do you have about the content and what needs further clarification?
- Can you give an example of a religious leader or movement in your own context with an extensive online presence?

## **Using the Internet for Practical Tasks in the Study of African Theology**

### **Using the Internet as a Resource of Primary Sources: Prayer as a Site of Theological Inquiry**

There is no doubt that the growth of the internet has provided incredible opportunities for religious actors to easily disseminate the content of their faiths to many more followers. Although much of this information is found in written formats, other online resources are not written specifically for academic purposes; nevertheless, they provide examples of the responses of these leaders and communities to God, and of the conditions of culture and history. Therefore, they provide a lived form of theological expression and reflection. They offer an abundance of primary resource materials for students and researchers of African Theology to examine as they work out the theologies underpinning such developments.

Prayer is a central spiritual activity in African religious life. Prayers are said either individually, corporately or by a skilled representative who has been appointed to this role by

the faith community. Prayer expresses one's beliefs about God and His involvement in the affairs of African life and in the order of the created universe. For this reason, prayer also expresses the theological self-understanding of those who perform it.

As part of the lived experiences of people of faith, the act of prayer presents those who pray in a variety of ways: as people seeking relief from intense human suffering due to ill health, disease or the death of a loved one; or as battling with witchcraft, demonic forces and spiritual pathologies that have stifled productivity; or as faced with a joyous occasion that they want to celebrate with members of the wider community. These prayers do not provide mere descriptions of the conditions of life, but also implicitly express how these events and situations are understood in relation to God.

In prayer, people may express trust and dependence upon their God as they navigate the events of daily life. For instance, they may call for help against evil forces that impact their lives, they may repent of their sins if these are viewed as the source of their troubles, or they may lament feeling forgotten by the God whom they trusted with all their lives.

For the study of African Theology, all these experiences of prayer point to the primary theological beliefs about God and God's abilities that are upheld at the grassroots of the religion in question. Through the prayers of the faithful, theologies of hope, healing, deliverance and celebration are expressed and could be critically analysed in leading to the discovery of fresh insights into the function of prayer in the grassroots theologies of actors in African Theology.

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### **Practical Tasks:**

#### *(i) Class Exercise*

It will help students if the teacher provides a practical example of a topic of lived African theology that can be researched online. If the equipment is available, the teacher can (after due preparation) do this on a laptop in class while projecting the search so that the students can follow it. If not, a teacher may do the online research before class and then share the results of the research with the students during the taught session.

It may be interesting if this is done using a topic the teacher is currently researching, or on a topic of direct interest to the students. Alternatively, we suggest conducting online research that helps you to give a systematic account of the prayer pilgrimages and retreats undertaken

by Pentecostals in rural Ghana. Identify three primary online resources (such as blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook page entries and/or other websites) where these religious communities are engaged in prayer rituals.

*(ii) Homework*

Conduct online research that helps you to give a systematic account of the prayer pilgrimages of either (a) members of the Zionist churches in South Africa, or (b) members of the banned Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments in Uganda. For each case chosen, identify three primary online resources (such as blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook page entries and/or other websites) where these religious communities are engaged in prayer rituals. Further, provide a brief description of the resource, citing the biblical references, theological positions and cultural characteristics that are used by the group to support the practice of prayer. For each web resource you have identified, explain why it could be a useful resource that deepens understanding of the forms and theologies of prayer espoused by either Zionist Christians in South Africa or members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments Movement in Uganda.

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### **Using the Internet as a Resource of Secondary Sources: Theologies of Muslim/Christian Relations**

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to many of the world's major religions. Recent estimates indicate that:

The number of Muslims living between the Sahara Desert and the Cape of Good Hope has increased more than 20-fold, rising from an estimated 11 million in 1900 to approximately 234 million in 2010. The number of Christians has grown even faster, soaring almost 70-fold from about 7 million to 470 million. Sub-Saharan Africa now is home to about one-in-five of all the Christians in the world (21%) and more than one-in-seven of the world's Muslims (15%). (Pew Research Centre)

Here, issues of interreligious encounters, relations, witness, dialogue and peaceful coexistence are considered a normal part of daily life. Sometimes these relationships are tense or even violent, but in other contexts African Christians have learned to negotiate competing truth claims, power structures and religious differences, and to witness, dialogue and peacefully coexist with the religious other.

While Christians in Africa have always sought to evangelize followers of other religions, they have most often done so while avoiding evangelizing in ways that undermine the personhood of followers of other religions or hamper amicable relationships with peoples of other faiths. Nevertheless, there has been frequent interreligious conflict and violence. These conflicts have a variety of causes, motivations and triggers in different religious communities and threaten to derail the gains of peaceful coexistence in Africa. Studying these occurrences could be instructive in the development of an African Theology of interreligious witness and dialogue, which could help the continent deal with its increasing incidence of interreligious conflicts.

The internet provides both primary and secondary sources on Christian-Muslim relations. In this exercise we focus on secondary sources, which can take the form of academic articles and books, teaching materials, reports, etc.

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**Practical Tasks:***(i) Class Exercise*

As a researcher of African Theology, identify public universities, theological seminaries and/or research centres in Africa where theologies of Muslim/Christian relations are taught as part of the curriculum. Provide links to these websites and a brief list and description of the resources they provide that can be used for the study of Muslim-Christian relations.

*(ii) Homework*

As a researcher of African Theology, conduct online research that helps you to create a bibliography of resources that are relevant for the study of Christian-Muslim relations in either (a) Northern Nigeria or (b) Zanzibar, Tanzania. In your lists, distinguish:

1. Printed sources available through your library
2. Printed sources not (yet) available to you
3. Online resources that are Open Access
4. Online resources not (yet) freely accessible

5. Online resources available through your library – this last section is only relevant if your library subscribes to online collections behind paywalls.

Critically compare the relevance and quality of (1) what you can access in print or online through your library, (2) what you can access online for free, (3) sources in print or online that you now know that exist, but that you cannot (yet) access.

Note: sources that are relevant for your study may have a wider scope than ‘Muslim-Christian relations in Zanzibar/Northern Nigeria’. For example, they may have to do with Muslim-Christian relations in Africa in general.

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### **Combining Primary and Secondary Sources in One Search: Struggles for Liberation**

Increasingly, the study of African Theology now includes reflections on the struggles for liberation and dignity undertaken by oppressed peoples as they respond to God and to the conditions of human culture and history. For instance, in much of Southern Africa, local people were embroiled in a long struggle against white minority rule and other forms of institutionalized racism which were used to oppress major sections of the population. In Eastern and Central Africa, the clamour for independence from colonial domination was often brutal and took a heavy toll on the local populations who rose up to agitate for self-determination and political independence. However, despite attaining political independence, modern African states still struggle with issues such as poor governance, corruption, endemic poverty and other forms of social injustices that dampen trust in the ability of the political establishment to deliver on electoral promises. Further, the continent’s abundant deposits of natural mineral and agricultural resources have been exploited by foreign multinational corporations who are supported by corrupt politicians. This has prevented the huge profits derived from natural resources from benefitting the communities in which these minerals and natural resources are found. In such instances, churches acting either as independent denominations or in collaboration with national ecumenical bodies, have denounced these gross injustices, campaigned against corruption and stood against human rights violations.

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#### **Practical Tasks:**

*(i) Class Exercise*

As a researcher of African Theology, conduct online research into the church's public engagements in Sierra Leone and Malawi. For Sierra Leone, identify primary online platforms which highlight the roles Christians and churches have played in helping the nation to deal with issues of child labour in the diamond industry. For Malawi, demonstrate the role that churches played in the election of their current president, who was a former General Superintendent of the Assembly of God church. Furthermore, for each topic identify 3-5 academic secondary sources that help your study of the topic.

*(ii) Homework*

As a researcher of African Theology, conduct online research into the church's public engagements either in (a) South Africa, or (b) Ethiopia. If you chose South Africa, identify platforms that document the responses of churches to the excesses of apartheid and to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. If you chose Ethiopia, identify primary and secondary online platforms that showcase the response of Protestant churches to injustices committed against ethnic minorities in Ethiopia. Furthermore, list 3-5 academic secondary sources that help your study of the topic you choose.

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## Note to Teachers

Many teachers will work out their own ways of integrating this material into their classes. However, here is a suggestion of one way this can be done:

- Begin with an introductory session in which you encourage your learners to discuss the preparatory questions listed above (about the uses of the internet in the study of African Theology) using Bangura and van den Toren, "Local Theologies on the Worldwide Web" and other relevant resources.
- You can use the class exercises to model to the students how they can search for relevant sources on the internet. You may be able to project your own search using a projector or larger monitor. Alternatively, you can suggest search terms and check whether students are able to find the relevant websites. Please be aware that despite using the same search engines different users may get varying results depending on their individual search histories.
- Here are some suggestions of what to focus on in your assessment of the homework:
- Assess whether learners have correctly identified, and listed as primary, secondary and/or archival, online materials suited for the study of African Theology.



- Assess whether students have looked broadly and persistently enough for the appropriate and relevant resources.
- Assess whether the links provided by learners refer users to a wide variety of relevant types of online resources such as social media platforms, websites, repositories, collections or archives.

## References

Bangura, J.B., & van den Toren, B. (2021) Local Theologies on the World Wide Web: Various Uses of the Internet for the Study of Theology in Africa. *Impact: Journal of Transformation*, 4(1), 1-8. Retrieved from <https://journals.aiu.ac.ke/index.php/impact/article/view/79>

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